

CHARLES CHAMPLIN

Voice of Protest Makes the Scene

The Beatles will fill the Hollywood Bowl to overflowing on Sunday and Monday nights, and the screams of the faithful will rend the night air. But the more significant



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concert will come a week later, when a wild-haired, sad-faced, preoccupied young man named Bob Dylan appears.

Dylan, born in Duluth 24 years ago and a nomad virtually ever since, is the principal Pied Piper of a revolution in the pop music scene. Nineteen sixty-five will go down in history as the year the lyric became important again—particularly the lyric of social awareness and protest. And Dylan, singer-composer-poet, is more than anyone else the man

who has taken the message-centered song from one side of the music scene, so to speak, and plunked it right in the center stage Top Ten country where the Beatles and the Rolling Stones play.

Billboard magazine has christened the newest new sound "folk rock," which neatly sums up its blending of folk music content and rock 'n' roll beat.

Ever since rock 'n' roll burst onto the American scene in the mid-50s, it has been as interesting to the sociologist as to the musicologist. Rock 'n' roll became the anthem of the teen-age revolution, the marching song of the apartheid by which the young generation declared itself independent of their square elders. So far as it had any lyric content at all, the music implied a disengagement from almost everything except the immediate concerns of that private young world. It was as romantic as only four amplified guitars and a full set of drums can be, and it was self-centered.

Now the same age group that once thrilled to "Hound Dawg" is making a best-seller out of a long, angry cry of despair, as subtle as a dum-dum bullet fired at close range, called "The Eve of Destruction," written by a 19-year-old named Phil Sloan and sung by Barry McGuire on the Dunhill label.

Sardonic Line Repeated

"The eastern world is explodin', violence flarin', bullets loadin'," the song begins. "Don't you understand what I'm tryin' to say? / Can't you feel the fears I'm feelin' today?" And the song's sardonic repeated line is, "But you tell me over and over and over again, my friend, you don't believe we're on the eve of destruction."

It's a far cry from "Woolly Bully," and the sociologists have their work cut out for them again, to determine whether this new element in the Top Ten means that the teen-agers are nosing out of their affluent private world and taking a look at the messy world the rest of us inhabit. I think it does.

Dylan himself is not a lead-pipe pamphleteer like the lyricist of "Eve of Destruction" but a poet who makes his points with biting humor. He is also not a rock 'n' roll performer. (He was booed at the recent Newport Folk Festival when he showed up with an electric guitar.) He's an old-style folk singer, with a harmonica holder and a guitar which he sometimes frets with a borrowed lipstick cartridge.

But his songs are now being recorded by the rock groups. The Byrds' recording of his "Mr. Tambourine Man" has been high in the charts, and the Byrds also do his "Chimes of Freedom." Not surprisingly, Dylan's first and continuing idol is Woody Guthrie, one of the eloquent protesting voices of the depression.

Fresh Intelligence at Work

Dylan's singing voice usually has the liquid beauty of a buzzsaw hitting a hickory knot, but the lines that emerge are more often than not astonishingly funny or lovely or trenchant. In his "Spanish Harlem Incident," he sings, "On the cliffs of your wildcat charms I'm riding." In "Mr. Tambourine Man" (which may or may not be about the New York junkie scene) are lines like "circled by the circus sands," "down the foggy ruins of time" and "In the jingle-jangle morning I will follow you," all of which suggest a genuinely fresh intelligence at work.

In a free verse poem given as liner notes on one of his albums, Dylan says, "My songs are written with the kettledrum in mind / a touch of any anxious color, unmentionable, obvious . . . with a melodic purring line of descriptive hollowness . . ."

"Blowin' in the Wind" established his fame as composer-performer. "Masters of War" is an uncharacteristically fufious song ending "I'll stand over your grave till I'm sure you are dead." His "Talking World War III Blues" is bitter-funny.

And the point is, his audience now extends well beyond the traditional folk song set.